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“A Dose of Epsom Salt Doesn’t Cure Everything”

One of my favorite pastimes is collecting plant stories. More specifically, cures for various plant ailments that are passed down through the generations. Some of these remedies work under certain circumstances, while others have no scientific basis.

Anywhere that people gather however, there is always someone with advice on how to cure a sick plant. Over the years I have listened intently to many of these instructions and have written quite a few down for future reference.

Some that come to mind include: burying a can of lye under a pecan tree; when planting a tomato plant, bury a match head near the root ball; beating a peach tree to make it bear and the very popular dose of Epsom salt.

Epsom salt contains magnesium and, in some cases, an application can yield remarkable results if this particular nutrient was not present in the soil in sufficient quantity. The problem with simply adding Epsom salt to the soil around any ailing plant is that it is usually guesswork. There are 16 essential elements that are necessary for proper plant growth and development and magnesium is only one of them. Excessive magnesium could potentially cause problems as bad, or worse than, having a deficiency in the soil.

Symptoms of magnesium deficiency are fairly common and this is a disorder that gardeners along the Gulf Coast should be aware of. Typical leaf symptoms begin as a yellowing, and later a whitening between the veins while the veins remain green. In advanced stages the tissue between the veins dies and often falls out. Early stages of magnesium deficiency on leaves can be confused with iron deficiency symptoms.

Locally, many of the tropical or subtropical plants seem to be more sensitive to low levels of magnesium in the soil. Palms, hibiscus and mandevilla are often seen with deficiency symptoms.

The only way to know if magnesium is truly limiting plant development is to have a soil test done. If a deficiency is found in the soil, then a specific recommendation can be made to correct the problem.

The product recommended might well be Epsom salt. On the other hand, the soil test will reveal the relative amounts of calcium to magnesium. In most plants this ratio should be maintained at about 5 to 1. Dolomite lime is often recommended where either calcium or magnesium is low because it naturally has the right ratio of these two elements.

Note: Avoid the use of dolomite or other lime products within the root zone of the “acid loving” plants except under very special circumstances. Azaleas, camellias, gardenias, hollies and blueberries for example, can be severely damaged by lime applications.

Question of the Week: My gardenias are still blooming, and it is early August! Isn't this late for them to flower?

Answer: Yes, most gardenias begin flowering in our area soon after the azaleas have finished in April. Sometime in June they are usually finished, and any necessary pruning can be done.

My guess is that the extended drought and heat delayed bud development and subsequent flowering. Enjoy the late blooms, but don't prune this season unless it is absolutely necessary. Pruning this late in the season could result in fewer flowers next spring.